

A R T I G O S

The sociology of religion and the “desecularisation of society”

*Reflexão sobre alguns
dos importantes e recentes
desenvolvimentos que a
sociologia da religião
tem tido na Alemanha,
na França e em países
anglo-saxónicos,
que surgem como uma
"nova sociologia cultural",
um "novo paradigma"
no debate sobre a
desseccularização
da sociedade.
Apesar deste enfoque,
eles são já identificados
noutras sociedades,
como em Portugal
e no Brasil.*

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Introduction

The goals of this paper are twofold: having written an introduction into the Sociology of Religion in the middle of the 1990s¹, I want to delineate some important analytical developments in this field that have happened since – developments that have come quite unexpected to many of us. In order not to reduce myself to a theoretical sketch, I want to exemplify these theoretical developments that are most closely linked to changes in the state and perception of religion in modern societies. In talking about modern society, I should apologise for the fact that my perception may be somewhat biased: It focuses on phenomena in Central Europe as well as in the Anglo-Saxon speaking societies. I am well aware of the diversity of religion beyond this scope even within Europe, i.e. between societies that have been coined by Roman-Catholicism, such as Portugal, Ireland or Austria, societies with mixed confessions, such as Germany and Switzerland, societies that have been influenced by Protestantism, such as Sweden and Norway, and finally those under the (recovered) influences of Orthodoxy, such as Greece or Russia – let alone the difference of societies in other areas of the world and with respect to other religions. Despite all these differences I would hold

¹ KNOBLAUCH, Hubert (1999): *Religionssoziologie*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter. A Croatian translation of the book has been published in 2004.

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that the phenomena discussed here are or relevance in other societies, i.e. in Western societies.

Resacralisation and Secularisation

To all of us, this has been a decade that has changed the face of religion fundamentally. Already in the 1970s Daniel Bell has announced a resacralisation of society when Protestant Fundamentalism had developed to become a political force in the United States.² In the 1990s, Huntington argued that religions would take on epochal significance. Following Fukuyamas thesis on the end of history, he argued that now religions will become the major forces for conflicts between different cultures. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. In his view it is primarily religions that define cultures and cultural areas.³

Huntington's thesis gained world prominence since the events of 9/11, and it was received for it anticipated the increasing globalisation of religion, a phenomenon highlighted by Beyer. Nevertheless it has been seriously attacked to oversimplifying cultural borders, for ignoring important differences in and between religions and in overstressing the role of violent conflicts. Attacks have been so harsh as to even reproach him that the thesis has been received so widely as to even contribute to the situation it claimed to analyse in the way of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, there is evidence that indicates for an increasing importance of religion. In contradistinction to Luckmann's thesis of privatisation, Spanish sociologist José Casanova has called this process the de-privatisation of religion. By de-privatisation he understands the process by which religion leaves its place in the private sphere in order to participate in the ongoing debates and legitimation in the public sphere (1994: 65f.): Religion supports the defence of rights and liberties or defends traditional life-forms from bureaucratic attacks. The fact that religion turns to be an actor on the public sphere proves to Casanova the move towards a public religion that is located between the public sphere and the institutions of the civil society. Public religions this transcends the borderline between public and private in that it may range from individual mysticism to organised denominations and from established to spontaneous event-like organisation. Public religion thus may also mean that religion becomes politicized, part or/and actor within the political debate – and also, as we know, a nowadays partly unknown subject for the debates of political parties, for legislation

² Bell, Daniel (1977): «The return of the sacred? The argument on the future of religion», in: *British Journal of Sociology* 28, 4, 419-49.

³ Cf. Huntington, Samuel P. (2002): *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Schuster & Schuster. Using various studies of history, Huntington divided the world into the «major» civilizations in areas, defining their civilisations as essentially the world religions dominating in these areas, such as Western Christendom Europe, North America, Australia, Orthodox Christendom (Eastern Europe, Russia), the Muslim world (Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia), the Hindu civilisation (India, Nepal), the Sinic civilisation (China, Korea, Vietnam), and the Buddhist civilisation (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Mongolia etc), Japan being considered a hybrid.

and for the executive. Moreover, religion played and plays an important role in the re-ethnicization we witnessed after the end of the cold war. The newly emerging new political entities, such as the Polish democratic state, Bosnia or Croatia referred to religion as one major element of their legitimacy (or the illegitimacy of the other).

Although already described to some detail in my sociology of religion, I have to turn again to the new paradigm since this is still one of the most prominent ways to explain the increased importance of religion. New paradigm is a self-label for a number of scholars who base their analysis of religion on rational choice theory. That is, they assume that actors are oriented by a utilitarian principle. Their decisions depend on the expected costs and gratifications of actions in such a way as to maximise the gratifications and to minimise their expenditures. This principle, new paradigm representatives maintain, is also valid in the field of religion: This-worldly costs (such as payments to churches, time of participation in rituals and investments in religious education) are calculated with respect to other-worldly compensations, such as eternal life, redemption or salvation. Since these compensations are not available in this world, religion relies heavily on trust. One way to guarantee trust consist in organising communities of believers who are the more trustworthy, the fewer the this-worldly uses are they yield from being member of the organisation. This implies that churches who demand fewer costs may be less trustworthy when it comes to other-worldly compensations than sects.

Since, to this view, religion is governed by utilitarian actions as is economy, the market seems to them as the perfect social order for religion. Almost in the manner of neo-liberal economists, they suggest that the more competition there is in terms of religious offers, the more demand can be satisfied, i.e. the more attractive religion may be. Vice versa, the regulation of the market and tendencies of monopolization reduce the attractiveness of religion to actors and lead to increasing indifference and secularization.⁴

This way, the new paradigm claims to explain differences e.g. in the recruiting of priests: As a rule, in those areas in which Catholicism competes with a number of religions, there are more persons prepared to become catholic priest – a decision which implies quite heavy personal costs, as we know. The model, however, even addresses more general differences. Thus, the reason for the decline of religion in Europe is attributed to the monopolistic and heavily state regulated situation of religion in Europe, whereas the American situation proves that competition and a free market yield a lively religious situation.⁵ On this background, the new paradigm even attacked European sociologists of religion for prematurely proclaiming secularisation as a feature of modern society since it is, they argue, only a feature of European societies and, in a way, an exception. Although not being part of the new paradigm, Peter Berger was one of the first to stress these differences: "In Western Europe, if nowhere else, the old secularisation theory would seem to hold." (Berger 1999: 9f).

⁴ A thesis that is also put forward by one of the inventors of the market model. Cf. *Peter Berger*: The desecularization of the world, in: Peter L. Berger (Hg.): The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics, Washington 1999, 1-18.

⁵ *Rodney Stark/James McCann*: Market Forces and Catholic Commitment: Exploring the New Paradigm, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32, 2 (1993); *Stephen Warner*: Work in progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1993), 1044-1093.

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It comes to no surprise that the critique of the new paradigm was particularly harsh in Europe. Thus the British sociologist Steve Bruce criticises the deficiencies in the empirical analysis of quantitative data by the new paradigm. The data, he argues, does not back the thesis of increasing religiosity.⁶ He maintains, to the contrary, that the secularization process is continued.⁷

In fact, one should distinguish between different kinds of secularization. Internal secularisation refers to the fact that people are less and less believing in religious dogmas, and their conduct loses the dependence on ethical imperatives of church teachings. External secularization denotes the decreasing importance of religion in the life of the people: Church rituals, praying, crosses in private houses etc. are increasingly losing their importance. Again, one should possibly tell this external secularization from structural secularization: Having been the central institution of pre-modern societies, religious organisations are turning into rather peripheral institutions that are not any more privileged over other institutions. Even if they maintain a public role, as Casanova claims, this public role is in no way comparable to the historic predecessors.

Yet other European sociologists stress that the thesis of secularisation does not really cover the situation of religion in Europe.⁸ There is a number of societies, such as Poland, Ireland or Italy, in which religion still plays an important role for the subjects as well as in public life. As opposed to the new paradigm, the importance of religion in those societies is linked to a strong monopoly of one religion. One of the reasons may be that religion, e.g. Catholicism in Italy, succeeded to diversify internally to such a high degree as to be able to absorb the multitude of demands in a plural society.⁹

Markets and the Popular Religion

On this background one may argue that in Europe, yet possibly not only there, the market may function in different ways (and, I may add, on different grounds) as the rational choice theorists assume. (Although one may add that church organisations in Europe accepted the rational choice model so that we witness a process of self fulfilling prophecy when it comes to the market of religion: It is much more created by the churches rather than it comes about.) Religion in Europe, it seems to me, follows another pattern than that conceived of by the liberal market paradigm. One may outline the liberal model as follows:

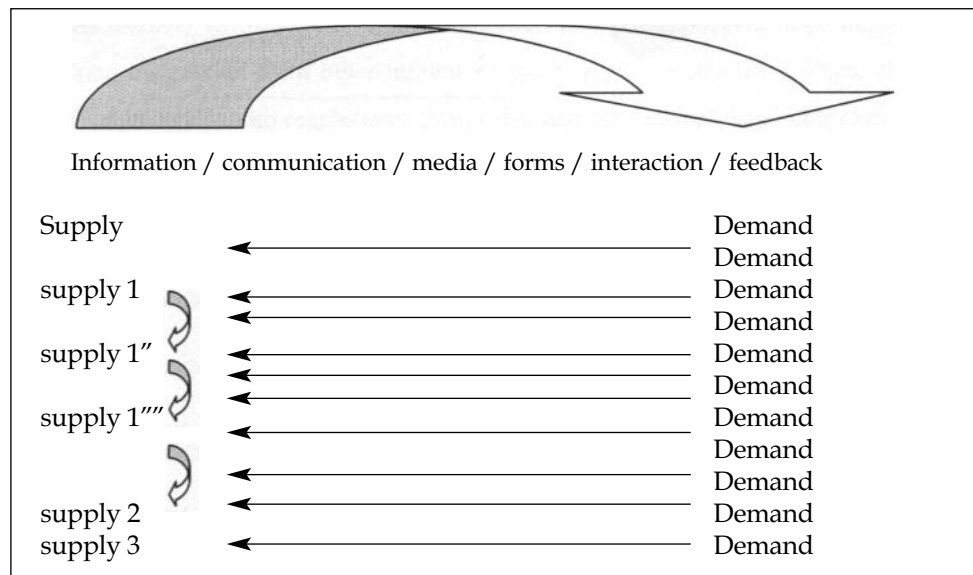
⁶ Steve Bruce: *Choice and Religion. A Critique of Rational Choice Theory*, Oxford 1999.

⁷ A very detailed version of the secularisation thesis is elaborated by Bruce, Steve (2002): *God is Dead. Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell 2002, 5ff.

⁸ Davie Grace: *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, Oxford 2000; Paul M. Zulehner/ Hermann Denz: *Wie Europa lebt und glaubt. Europäische Wertestudie*, Düsseldorf 1993; Sheena Ashford/ Noel Timms: *What Europe thinks. A Study of European Values*, Aldershot 1992; Roland J. Campiche (Hg.): *Cultures jeunes et religions en Europe*, Paris 1997; Grace Davie/ Danièle Hervieu-Léger: *Identités religieuses en Europe*. Paris: La Découverte 1996; Hubert; Knoblauch (Hg.): *Europe and the Invisible Religion*. Sonderheft von Social Compass 2003.

⁹ Diotallevi, Luca: *Il rompicapo della secolarizzazione italiana. Caso italiano, teorie americane e revisione del paradigma della secolarizzazione*, Mailand 2001.

LIBERAL MARKET MODEL



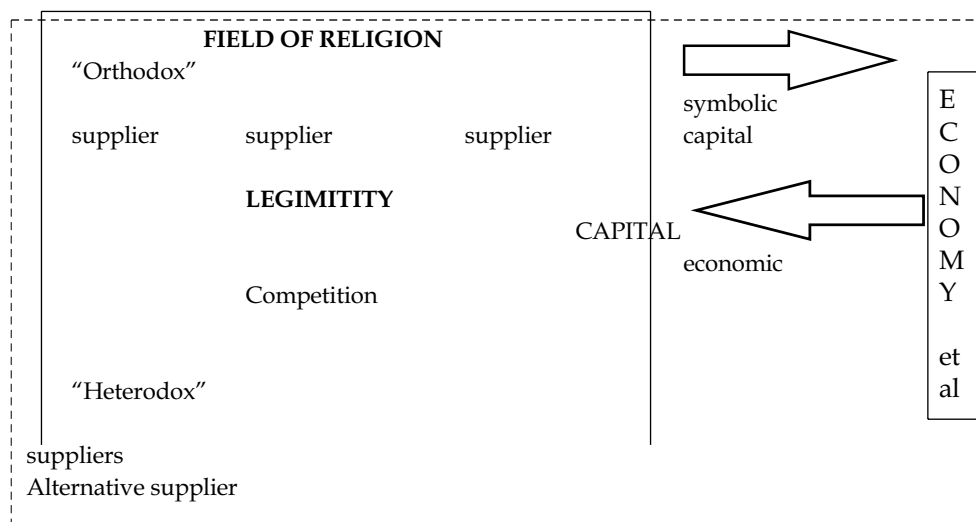
Religious organisations provide supply for religious demand which is governed by an utilitarian calculus. The more demand is being created, the more supply will be provided, adapting to the various demands by differentiating the kind of supply. Often overlooked, communication fulfils the function of market communication, i.e. informing about the supply as well as about the demand.

It is exactly the often ignored role of communication that causes a transformation of the model: It seems overtly simplifying to assume that market communication does but provide exact information for action. Demand is, as we especially see in the field of religion, regulated by symbolic meanings; one may say that religious products and services are primarily dependent on symbolic meanings which are communicated to the consumers in such a way as to be understood in their life-world. If we include this symbolic dimension, the ideal surplus-value, if one may say, the above sketched model does not suffice any more. Therefore, I propose a second, social-symbolic model that is adapted from the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu has shown that markets are not only regulated by demand but also by institutions that have power. Being based on legitimation, power can be seen as a preference structure for certain suppliers, whereas the lack of power handicaps other suppliers who themselves try to increase the power of their symbolic supply. If they succeed, they can exchange their supplies like a symbolic capital, i.e. in becoming accepted as part of the education system, in getting taxes from the state or in being accepted by the media public. Markets are, Bourdieu agrees, driven by competition, but competition is not "free" but structured. One may add that even a "free market" as in the US is a construction that presupposes a huge range of regulations freeing the market from other influences (such as monopolization). Thus, also the religious market involves state regulations, power distinctions between legal churches and illegitimate sects – as well as ongoing changes, such as the clericalisation of Euro-Islam.

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INSTITUTIONAL MARKET MODEL

*Dissolution of the field*

The second model is not to refute the first one; rather, I presume, both models are at work at the same time, the first being implemented by religious organisation in relation to assumed individual demand, the second working on the level between religious organisation and in the communication between religious and other organisations. The second field is predominantly constituted by the competition for legitimation as religion. This holds for Islam (that is a religion, yet not legitimated the like in the West) as well as for sects and new religious movements (occultism etc.).

It is interesting that Bourdieu's model of the market extends a motive already indicated by Luckmann: To both, the dynamics of religion is not restricted to the competition for the legitimation as religion. Indeed, Bourdieu observed what he called the “dissolution of the field of religion”. At the “lower” margins of the fields, actors compete for the symbolic manipulation of behaviour and meaning in the private life. In this sense, priests are not only competing with prophets and magicians, as Weber had it, but also with psychologists, medical healers, life coaches, social workers, teachers of holistic ways of living and even martial arts (Bourdieu 1992: 233).

In fact, especially in those societies in which religion takes on an organisational well defined form, we witness that religious topics as well as religious behaviour is being processed in channels and ways that extend by far the activities of these organisations. Although not being considered as religious, religious organisations feel that they compete with these topics and behaviours in a way that resembles their competition with other religions and with sects and magics in what may be called the black market of religion.

The competitors in this black market do not offer anything that may be labelled religion. Nevertheless what they offer may fulfil the functions of religion: Thus radical political world views (from fascism to ecology and animal rights), aesthetic preferences

(from Punk to modern dance), sports (from extreme sports to sports fans) and media (from Starship enterprise to Madonna) may fulfil a religious function although they are not religiously organised in any sense. Their organisation is, rather, defined by the modern popular culture, cultural forms of communication that heavily depend on the modern communication media and commercial organisation. Note that these forms are not restricted to the media only: the modern event as well as the social structure of networks are also dependant on the media. It is by no accident that religious organisations adapt these forms of communication; one may even say, the more religious organisations adapt to such forms, the more they are successful, (the "conservatism" of their use of social forms corresponding to the kind of audience attracted).

In proposing the notion of popular religion, I do, however, not only refer to those forms of, one may say, modern popular culture that fulfil religious functions; the title also extends to religion in a more precise sense. In contemporary society, religious topics as well as religious behaviour do not only occur in the field of religion and religious communication. They also occur in other areas. Obviously, this includes what one may call metaphorical religion: Madonna alluding to the crucifix as an artistic use of religion as is as metaphoric as the worship ritual of a football fan or the magic rituals of management seminars. Metaphorical is also the understanding of "capitalism" as religion – if it does not refer to charismatic capitalism and similar phenomena. Even more important for popular religion seems to me that topics and activities that are marked as religious in the *mémoire collective* of even those who are not religious any more, are being processed outside of religion. Thus, one may say that substantial parts of the ultramodern culture of the dead: grieving, mourning, hospices, dead death believes as well as rituals – are communicated outside the religious organisations. At least in Germany, churches seem to play a minor role when it comes to the question how to understand and cope with the dead – one of the basic topics of Christian religion. In a way, popular religion may be seen as a successor to what has been called superstition. But ignoring the fact that churches have no longer the power to ban these forms of beliefs and action – the popularity of this religion depends on the fact that is communicated in forms generated by popular culture: Pop songs, newspaper reports, popular novels etc.

Spirituality and Subjectivity

Rational Choice theories of religion have also been opposed by a number of scholars although they acknowledge the role of the subject: In the US, Spickard and others stress the constitutive role of subjective experience for religion which is being understood in terms of Schutz' phenomenology.^{10 e 11} Experiences are considered to be the pivot mediating between society and individual:¹² "Sociology's task is to study both the interface of the objective social context and its bearing upon religious experience

¹⁰ Most explicitly in: Mary J. Neitz/ James V. Spickard: Steps toward a sociology of religious experience: The theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Alfred Schutz, in: *Sociological Analysis* 51, 1 (1990), 15-33; Alfred Schütz: Über die mannigfaltigen Wirklichkeiten, in: *Theorie der Lebenswelt* 1. Die pragmatische Schichtung der Lebenswelt. Konstanz 2003, 181-239.

¹¹ Lawrence A. Young (Hg.): *Rational Choice and Religion. Summary and Assessment*. New York and London 1997.

¹² James V. Spickard: Experiencing religious rituals. *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991): 191-204.

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as well as subjective interpretations of religious experience and how they impact the social world".¹³

The subjective dimension of religion plays also some role in the French work of Danièle Hervieu-Léger. She considers religious experience to be a constitutive feature of modern religious identity by which individuals are included into the collective memory. Religion, she says, is an ideological, practical and symbolic mechanism pertaining to a certain tradition of belief that constitutes, maintains, supports and controls consciousness.¹⁴ To an even more radical degree Heelas and Woodhead have put forward the thesis of the "spiritual revolution".¹⁵ Whereas forms of religion that require obedience and authority are in decline, subjective life forms of the sacred are gaining ground. Whereas the former are declining, the latter are flourishing to such a degree that one gets the impression of a religious revival. Heelas and Woodhead are focusing particularly on what has been known as "New Age" for a long time, i.e. forms of esoteric spirituality and magical practices which they discover to penetrate everyday life in a normal average town.

Whereas Heelas and Woodhead restrict themselves to so to say religions incorporating postmaterialist values (such as self-fulfilment), I would argue that the spiritual revolution extends also to other forms. No doubt, it is particularly in Europe that subjective-life forms are flourishing. In terms of religious studies, one should call them "alternative religions", since they typically draw on religious traditions that are distinguished from the hegemonic forms known in the European tradition: magic and "superstitions", esotericism, pagan religions, eastern religions, American, African and Caribbean religions play a prominent role, and even if it comes to the hegemonic Christian traditions, one prefers the long suppressed mystical and the few known monastic expressions. Alternative religiosity is characterised by a low degree of organisation, as is most succinctly expressed in the motive of the network (sponsored by the New Age since the early 1980s). Consequently, alternative religions are characterised by a low degree of dogmatism, that is to say that there are few if any core beliefs shared by a huge number of believers. Most importantly, however, alternative religiosity's centre may be seen in the chance to experience religiosity personally. The subjective experience, thus, is not just an anthropological feature of religion, as stressed by Glock and Luckmann; it is an idea explicitly held and institutionalised in alternative religions of the West. For this reason, one may talk about subjectivisation much more than of spiritualisation. Stress lies not only on mystical visions, but also on altered states of consciousness, peak experiences, near-death experiences, reincarnation therapies, channelling, out-of-body experiences, spiritualism – not to mention Yoga and Meditation practices. Since these experiences are assigned to transcendent powers, energies and spirits, they are closely connected to magical and particularly alternative medical and psychological healing practices – an area that constitutes the economic pillar of alternative religions.

The subjectivity of religion is by no means marginal. Although one may admit that it is most difficult to measure it in quantitative surveys, there are indications that a

¹³M. Poloma: The sociological context of religious experience, in: R. Hood (Hg.), *Handbook of religious experience*. Birmingham AL 1995, 161-182, 179.

¹⁴Danièle Hervieu-Léger: *La religion pour mémoire*, Paris 1993, 119 (engl.: *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick 2000).

¹⁵Heelas, Paul and Linda Woodhead: *The Spiritual Revolution*. London: Blackwell 2004.

growing number of people could be labelled alternative. Already in the early nineties about one fourth of the Swiss have been identified as alternative; the numbers of believers in reincarnation is also increasing.¹⁶ Among young people, yin and yang is associated with as strong affect as is the crucifix. Nevertheless, one should stress that the number of activists is, in general, much smaller than the distribution of beliefs, practices and subjective experiences that extends today to the majority of the population (including church members).

In stressing the importance of the subjectivation of religion, we may discover one parallel between alternative religions and Christian movements. (The low degree of institutionalisation and the high degree of popularisation are further common elements.) The experiences of being reborn, i.e. the importance of a conversion experience, miracles, prophecies and other experiences are constitutive for those Christian movements that are labelled evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic or even fundamentalist. They constitute the basis for the current revitalisation of religion. Although difficult to estimate, there may be 200-300 million Pentecostals and 200-500 Million Charismatics (95 Million Catholics in 1999). It is assumed that in a few years these movements will constitute the majority of Christianity.¹⁷

There is no doubt that the comparison between these Christian movements and alternative spirituality should be made with prudence. However, subjectivation and popular religion seem to be those features that most obviously allow to describe sociologically the "return of the sacred" (Bell 1980).

Conclusion: The myth of disenchantment

So far we have been dwelling on the description of the forms of religion that seems to survive modernism better than ever assumed e.g. by the founders of modernity, such as Auguste Comte or Max Weber. On this background, one may end to ask for an explanation: Why could religion survive modernity that seemed so detrimental to it. As a first explanation, the end of history, the end of ideologies or at least the failure of socialist materialism and atheism may be cited. This explanation often is linked with assumption on epochal changes, claiming a basic transformation into "postmodern" religion. As an explanation that stressed the continuity of the development, one may draw on cyclical models of religion; in this vein one could explain the return of the sacred by generational effects that includes that the sons revolt against their atheist fathers and reinvigorate their grandfathers life-forms. Whatever else may have caused the return of the sacred – and I am sure that it is a combination of various models – the description offered yields another component for explanation. For given the fact

¹⁶ Thus Mayer (1993: 278) found that in Switzerland the core of the „New Age activists“ only include some thousand persons; however, the adherents of this belief amount to some fourth of the population.

¹⁷ Barrett estimates the number of pentecostals and charismatics at about 523 million for the year 2000. For the year 2005, he predicts some 800 million adherents. Cf. Barret (2000: 25). Brouwer u.a. (1996: 6) estimate, that in Latin America two thirds of protestants can be considered as pentecostals. Barret, David B. (2000): Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission, in: International Bulletin of Missionary Research January, 1ff. Brouwer, Steve, Paul Gifford and Susan D. Rose (1996): Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism. New York: Routledge.

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that contemporary religion is characterised by a fundamental change of form – would one not have to assume that religion was never really endangered? Instead of ousting religion, secularisation would not have meant the dead but the transformation of religion, and religion, as it turned out, has never been opposed to modernity but was ever an integral part of modern society.